

# Reshaping karma: an Indic metaphysical paradigm in traditional and modern astrology

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## Abstract

Despite its Hellenistic origins, horoscopic astrology has nowhere gained as firm and lasting acceptance as in India. It is argued that this acceptance is conditioned by the conformity of astrological practice – comprising both descriptive and prescriptive aspects – to the doctrine of action or *karman* central to the Indic religions. The relation of astrology to this doctrine is examined with regard to questions on causality, determinism and moral freedom. Traditional conceptions of *karman* are then contrasted with *fin-de-siècle* Theosophical notions of ‘karma’ as a fundamentally evolutive, spiritual force, used to redirect the practice of astrology from prediction towards esoteric interpretation. It is noted that this modern development constitutes a reversal of the European medieval and Renaissance compromise between theology and astrology.

**H**oroscopic astrology is now commonly agreed to have been invented or discovered – depending on what view one takes of its legitimacy – in Hellenistic Egypt, around the second century BCE.<sup>1</sup> Some three centuries later it had made its way into northern India.<sup>2</sup> The Indian linguistic evidence clearly demonstrates the foreign origins of the discipline: from the earliest times, Sanskrit astrological literature abounds with Greek technical terms, in much the same way that modern books on computers and computer science in almost any language abound in (American) English jargon. The very word for astrology itself – *horā* – is of Greek derivation (ὥρα), as are the terms for its core technical concepts: *kendra* (κέντρον, angle), *panaphara* (ἐπαναφορά, succedent), *apoklima* (ἀπόκλιμα, cadent), *trikoḅa* (τρίγωνον, trine), *meṣūraḅa* (μεσουράνημα, midheaven), *kemadruma* (κενοδρομία, being void of course),

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<sup>1</sup> Pingree, David, *From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bīkāner* [hereafter Pingree, *Astral Omens*] (Roma: Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente), p. 21. I use the term ‘horoscopic’ here in the literal sense of containing or being based on the ὠροσκόπος (rising sign or degree), not in the wider sense of being ‘based on the date of birth’ (Campion, Nicholas: *The Dawn of Astrology* [hereafter: *Campion, Dawn*] (London: Continuum), p. 75).

<sup>2</sup> Pingree, *Astral Omens*, p. 33.

and so on. Most of these are terms for which no indigenous equivalents were ever coined, and which are used by Indian astrologers to the present day. Given these extra-Indian roots of horoscopic astrology, how do we explain the near-universal acceptance which it has enjoyed in Hinduism and in Indian culture generally for the best part of two thousand years?

From the time of its inception, astrology has served a twofold purpose. On one hand, it attempts to analyse and interpret the qualities inherent in a given point of space-time – for instance, the time and place of a person’s birth. These qualities will manifest in whatever is begun or produced at this point, such as the unfolding of a human life. This is the basis of what we may call the *descriptive* role of astrology, which obviously presupposes a certain element of determinism or predictability. On the other hand, astrologers also advise on how to make best use of the qualities of space-time by undertaking or refraining from particular actions. In this *prescriptive* role, astrology clearly presupposes a certain measure of freedom to act on the part of the individual.

Early astrological texts are not much concerned with presenting detailed philosophical analyses of how or why astrology is supposed to work, focusing instead on practical rules and instructions. This has left later generations of astrologers great freedom to adapt their theoretical understanding of the art – what some might like to call its ‘ideological superstructure’ – while maintaining a high degree of continuity in terms of practice. In Europe and the Middle East, astrology has survived and, at times, flourished within the physical and intellectual boundaries of the monotheistic and absolutist Abrahamic religions, all rather different from the pluralistic and polytheistic milieu of its origin. But nowhere has astrology blended so seamlessly with the dominating *Weltanschauung*, with the metaphysical assumptions and ritual practices, as in India. The explanation, I believe, lies in the ubiquitous Indian doctrine of *karman* or action. (I use the full Sanskrit stem form *karman* here, rather than the usual ‘karma’, to distinguish the concept found in the Indic religions from its modern reinterpretations.)

Like astrology, *karman* – a fundamental tenet of both Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism – takes the middle ground between the doctrines of fate (*daiva*) and free will (*puruṣakāra*). Although teachings on *karman* within these traditions vary in details, common to all is the belief that the moral value of actions performed in previous lifetimes determines the individual’s present circumstances, thereby creating the framework within which new action is performed, and so on *ad infinitum*. In itself, this process has neither beginning nor end. *Karman* is inseparable from the cycle of *saṃsāra* or transmigration, of which it is the driving force; and *saṃsāra* constitutes a closed system without entry point or natural progression towards any final destination.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A *locus classicus* for the beginninglessness of *karman* and *saṃsāra* in brahminical tradition is Brahmasūtra 2.1.35 (*na karmāvibhāgād iti cen nānāditvāt*), refuting the objection that *karman*

In allowing for the interplay of fate and free will, *karman* thus offers an excellent theoretical model for astrology, more consistent with the art as actually practised than an absolute fatalism or doctrine of divine predestination. Not surprisingly, this model has in fact been invoked by Indian astrological authors for more than 1,700 years. Two images are prominently used to describe the role of astrology in relation to *karman*: that of divinity writing a person's destiny on his forehead, and that of a lamp illuminating objects in a dark room. The two are often, but not always, combined. A few examples will suffice:

The edict carrying the impact of previous action (*karman*), which was inscribed on one's forehead by the Creator, is revealed by this science even as a lamp [reveals] objects in utter darkness. (c. 300)<sup>4</sup>

The ripening of good and evil action (*karman*) accumulated in another birth is revealed by this science, as a lamp [reveals] objects in darkness. (c. 550)<sup>5</sup>

That string of letters which was written by the Creator on one's forehead may be clearly read by an astrologer with the flawless eye of astrology (*horā*). (c. 800)<sup>6</sup>

The row of letters which was written by the Creator on the tablet of men's foreheads in the world is truly revealed by an astrologer, and none other, with the flawless eye of astrology (*horā*). The ripening of what good or evil action (*karman*) was acquired in another birth is revealed by this science through the order of

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theory involves circular reasoning, the varying circumstances of life being conditioned by actions and actions again by circumstances of life. Śāṅkara comments: 'This is no fault [of reasoning], as transmigration (*saṃsāra*) is beginningless. It would be a fault if this transmigration had a beginning; but transmigration being beginningless, the existence of action (*karman*) and diversity of creation in the form of [both] cause and effect, like seed and sprout, is not self-contradictory' (*naiṣa doṣo 'nāditvāt saṃsārasya / bhaved eṣa doṣo yady ādimān ayaṃ saṃsāraḥ syād anādau tu saṃsāre bījāṅkuravad dhetuhetumadbhāvena karmaṇaḥ sargavaīṣamyasya ca pravṛttir na virudhyate*). Translations of this and other quotations in this paper are mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> Vṛddhayavanajātaka 1.3:

*yā pūrvakarmaprabhavasya dhātrī dhātrā lalāṭe likhitā praśastiḥ /  
tām śāstram etat prakāṣaṃ vidhatte dīpo yathā vastu ghane 'ndhakāre //*

<sup>5</sup> Laghujātaka 1.3:

*yad upacitam anyajanmani śubhāśubhaṃ tasya karmaṇaḥ paktim /  
vyāñjayati śāstram etat tamasi dravyāṇi dīpa iva //*

<sup>6</sup> Sārāvalī 2.1:

*vidhātrā likhitā yāsau lalāṭe 'kṣaramālikā /  
daivajñas tām paṭhed vyaktaṃ horānirmalacakṣuṣā //*

planetary periods (*daśā*), as a lamp [reveals] pots and other kinds [of objects] in darkness. (c. 1100 – 1400)<sup>7</sup>

As is clear from these and similar passages, Sanskrit authors typically take a non-causal view of astrology: the stars ‘reveal’ (*vyañj-*) good and evil events to come, but do not cause them. The real cause is *karman*, action performed in previous lives, which ‘ripens’ (*pac-*) into events in the current lifetime. Future events themselves are compared to physical objects in a dark house: although not apparent to the unaided eye, they do exist and may be discovered by the proper method.

The image of such destined events as a divine edict written on man’s forehead should be understood within its brahmanical context. There is no divine despotism involved in these decrees, which rather ‘carry the impact of previous action’: the Creator or Ordainer (*dhātr*, *vidhātr*) postulated by most forms of Hinduism is not Job’s inscrutable autocrat, but the supervisor and guarantor of the workings of *karman*, and it is our own actions which mould our destinies. In fact, the concepts of a supreme God and of *karman* serve to justify each other: for while the moral law of *karman* may be more easily understood and accepted as the just judgments of an omniscient divinity than as a purely impersonal force, it also saves this divinity from the objection of partiality or caprice. The medieval theologian Śāṅkara compares the role of God to that of the rain: the rain makes crops grow, but some seeds will grow into barley and others into rice. Similarly, God allows the actions of each living being to ripen according to their varying qualities.<sup>8</sup>

Wilhelm Halbfass has argued that ‘it can hardly be doubted’ that this view of *karman* as the underlying mechanism of astrology was sometimes challenged, and that earlier times especially – when Indian astrology was significantly influenced by its Greek and Babylonian source traditions – saw ‘a belief in an independent power of the stars to determine destiny, a power which can in no way be reduced to karma’.<sup>9</sup> This may seem a very reasonable supposition; but Halbfass produces no evidence from astrological texts to support it, and, to the best of my knowledge, there is none to be

<sup>7</sup> Horāmakaranda, introduction, verses 8–9 (reading *vyañjayatīha* for *vāṃcayatiha*):

*varṇāvalī yā likhitā vidhātrā lalāṭapaṭṭe bhuvī mānavānām /*  
*horādṛṣā nirmalayā yathāvat tām daivavid vyañjayatīha nānyaḥ //*  
*yad anyajanmany aśubhaṃ śubhaṃ vā karmārjitaṃ tasya vipaktim etat /*  
*vyanakti śāstraṃ hi daśākrameṇa ghaṭādijātaṃ tamasīva dīpaḥ //*

<sup>8</sup> Brahmasūtrabhāṣya ad 2.1.34.

<sup>9</sup> Halbfass, Wilhelm, *Karma und Wiedergeburt im indischen Denken* [hereafter Halbfass, *Karma*] (Kreuzlingen: Diederichs), p. 239: ‘Es kann aber kaum bezweifelt werden, daß dies nicht immer und nicht bei allen Lehrern oder Praktikern der Astrologie so gewesen ist. Es gab, insbesondere in älterer Zeit, auch den Glauben an eine selbständige, schicksalsbestimmende Macht der Gestirne, eine Macht, die keineswegs auf das Karma reduziert werden kann.’

had. Even the rare astrological passages which seem to hint at some causal power inherent in the *grahas* ('planets' in the original sense of πλάνητες ἀστέρες, 'wandering stars' including the sun and moon) typically do so within the framework of *karman* theory. This is the case when, for instance, the *Bṛhatpārāśarahorāśāstra*, an astrological work of c. 600 – 800, states that God – here identified as Janārdana, or Viṣṇu – assumes the form of the planets to bestow on living beings the results of their actions (*karman*).<sup>10</sup> The *karman* model is often explicitly invoked, and never explicitly rejected, so that Halbfass's grudging recognition that 'astrology is to a certain degree reconciled with the doctrine of karma' seems so understated as to be quite misleading.<sup>11</sup>

The one passage which Halbfass does cite in support of his belief in an early doctrine of independent astrological causality is taken not from an astrological text, but rather from a *dharmaśāstra* or socio-religious code of law dating from the early centuries CE:

When any [planet] is ill-placed for anyone, he should endeavour to worship that [planet]; [for] a boon was given to them by Brahmā: '[Having been] worshipped, you will worship [in return].' The rise and fall of kings and the existence and annihilation of the world depend on the planets: therefore the planets are most worthy of worship.<sup>12</sup>

Taken in isolation, these verses could perhaps sustain the interpretation placed on them by Halbfass, although the evidence would have to be called circumstantial. They occur, however, alongside directions for the worship of other deities, in a text which explicitly upholds the doctrine of *karman*.<sup>13</sup> The same verses are also repeated with minor variations in the *Bṛhatpārāśarahorāśāstra*, which, as we have just seen, likewise supports the *karman* theory.<sup>14</sup> We must conclude, then, that if ancient India did indeed

<sup>10</sup> *Bṛhatpārāśarahorāśāstra* 2.3: *jīvānām karmaphalado graharūpī janārdanaḥ*.

<sup>11</sup> Halbfass, *Karma*, p. 240: 'Die Astrologie ist in gewissem Maße mit der Karmalehre versöhnt.'

<sup>12</sup> *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.307–308:

*yāś ca yasya yadā duḥsthaḥ sa taṃ yatnena pūjayet /  
brahmaṇaiśāṃ varo dattaḥ pūjitāḥ pūjayiṣyatha //  
grahādhiṇā narendrāṇām ucchrāyāḥ patanāni ca /  
bhāvābhāvau ca jagatas tasmāt pūjyatamā grahāḥ //*

<sup>13</sup> So, for instance, *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.349:

*daive puruṣakāre ca karmasiddhir vyavasthitā /  
tatra daivam abhivyaktaṃ pauraṣam paurvadehikam //*

'The accomplishment of an act (*karman*) depends on both fate and human effort. Of these, fate is the manifestation of effort [performed] with a previous body.'

<sup>14</sup> *Bṛhatpārāśarahorāśāstra* 84.26–27:

*yasya yāś ca yadā duḥsthaḥ sa taṃ yatnena pūjayet /  
eṣāṃ dhātrā varo dattaḥ pūjitāḥ pūjayiṣyatha //*

know a belief in the ‘power of the stars to determine destiny’ independent of and rivalling the belief in *karman*, the textual evidence of that belief is yet to be produced. It may also be noted that astrology is only one of several divinatory arts historically practised in Indian culture, and that no causal link is normally assumed between the signs observed and the events foretold; rather, *karman* is the cause. A sixth-century text states: ‘To travelling men, auspices (*śakuna*) proclaim the ripening of good and evil actions (*karman*) performed in other births.’<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the verses just discussed do raise the question of whether religious acts such as the worship of deities – planetary or otherwise – can alter the future determined by *karman* and revealed by means of astrology. In theories on *karman*, actions performed in previous lifetimes are generally designated as ‘accumulated’ (*saṃcita*). Accumulated action is further divided into that portion which has begun to take effect (*prārabdha*) and that which has not (*aprārabdha*). The former is the *karman* determining the experiences of the present lifetime; the latter is stored up for lifetimes to come. Actions due to take effect in subsequent lifetimes may be neutralized by soteriological means; but the effects of *prārabdha* cannot be absolutely reversed, and it may therefore be seen as the more ‘fated’ aspect of *karman*.<sup>16</sup> And yet, the most basic assumption of *karman* theory is that we do have the freedom to choose between various courses of action, and are morally responsible for these choices. So which aspects of a

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*mānavānām grahādhinā ucchrāyāḥ patanāni ca /  
bhāvābhāvau ca jagatām tasmāt pūjyatamā grahāḥ //*

‘When any [planet] is ill-placed for anyone, he should endeavour to worship that [planet]; [for] a boon was given to them by the Creator: ‘[Having been] worshipped, you will worship [in return].’ The rise and fall of men and the existence and annihilation of the worlds depend on the planets: therefore the planets are most worthy of worship.’ The verses are not present in all editions of the text.

<sup>15</sup> Yogayātrā 23.1:

*anyajanmāntarakṛtaṃ puṃsām karma śubhāśubham /  
yat tasya śakunaḥ pākam nivedayati gacchatām //*

<sup>16</sup> In Śāṅkara’s words, ‘as an arrow, already released from the bow to hit a mark, even after hitting it ceases its flight only with the exhaustion of the force generated, so the action (*karman*) generating the body, although directed towards the purpose of maintaining the body, continues [to produce effects] as before until the force of the impressions (*saṃskāra*) [caused by *karman*] is exhausted. But that same arrow unreleased, the force causing its movement not yet generated, though set to the bow is withdrawn; thus, actions which have not begun to take effect [but] remain in their own resting-place are rendered impotent by knowledge’ (Bhagavadgītābhāṣya ad 13.23: *yathā pūrvam lakṣavedhāya mukta iṣur dhanuṣo lakṣyavedhottarakālam apy ārabdhavegaḥkṣayāt patanenaiva nivartata evaṃ śarīrāmbhakaṃ karma śarīrasthitiprayojane nivṛtte ’py ā saṃskāravega-ḥkṣayāt pūrvavad vartata eva / sa eveṣuḥ pravṛttinimittānārabdhavegas tv amukto dhanuṣi prayukto ’py upasaṃhriyate tathānārabdhaphalāni karmāṇi svāśrayasthāny eva jñānena nirbīkriyante*).

human life are determined by actions in previous lifetimes, and can those aspects be at all influenced by actions in the present?

Let us first be clear that these are not questions confined to astrology. Hindu codes of law frequently prescribe acts of atonement or *prāyaścitta*, meant to avoid or mitigate any future retribution – in this lifetime or the next – for sins committed either knowingly or unknowingly.<sup>17</sup> Apparently, then, a conscious act of piety in the present is considered capable of counteracting or mitigating the results of past misdeeds at least to some extent. When an evil event is foreseen, by astrology or any other means, and related by *karman* theory to some unknown sin committed in a previous existence, such an attempt to avert it is known as *śānti*, ‘pacification’ or ‘propitiation’. The practice of *śānti* underscores the dual nature of both *karman* and astrology: on one hand, the accumulated actions of previous lives ripening into a destiny described by the horoscope; on the other, the chance of acting on one’s knowledge of the stars to improve on one’s natal prospects.

Seeking a balance between these two aspects, astrological authors have divided *prārabdha-karman* further. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we find the encyclopedist Balabhadra discussing the arguments for and against what we may call the ‘strong’ view of karmic causality.<sup>18</sup> He quotes a previous author as saying: ‘Not even the counsellor of the king of gods, who has direct knowledge of destiny, is able to alter the fate which someone is to experience.’<sup>19</sup> To this and similar statements, Balabhadra replies by making a distinction between ‘firmly rooted’ (*dṛḍha-mūla*) and ‘loosely rooted’ (*śithila-mūla*) *karman*, only the former of which gives rise to irrevocable ‘fate’. A possible future event arising from less fixed *karman* can be counteracted, and herein lies the practical value of astrology.

Broadly speaking, however, it may be said that previous *karman* is believed to determine our experiences in the present lifetime – painful or pleasurable – along with our birth and, some would say, span of life.<sup>20</sup> The *outcome* of our actions is therefore

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Manusmṛti 11.45–46:

*akāmataḥ kṛte pāpe prāyaścittaṃ vidur budhāḥ /  
kāmākārakṛte ’py āhur eke śrutinidarśanāt //  
akāmataḥ kṛtaṃ pāpaṃ vedābhyāsenā śudhyati /  
kāmataḥ tu kṛtaṃ mohāt prāyaścittaiḥ prthagvidhaiḥ //*

‘The wise prescribe atonement for sin committed unintentionally, and some, because of indications in Revelation (*śruti*), even for [sin] committed wilfully. Sin committed unintentionally is washed away by study of the Veda; [sin] committed wilfully out of delusion, by atonements of various kinds.’

<sup>18</sup> Horāratna, introductory chapter.

<sup>19</sup> *yena tu yat prāptavyaṃ tasya vidhānaṃ sureśasacivo ’pi /  
yaḥ sāksān niyatijñāḥ so ’pi na śakto ’nyathā kartum //*

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Yogasūtra 2.13: ‘When the cause [i.e., *karman*] is present, its effects are birth,

largely determined beforehand, but not the actions as such. And yet this is only half true: for our actions shape not only our external fortunes, but also our character; and our character, very often, determines our further actions. The earliest formulations of *karman* theory are aware of this. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad (c. 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE?) states:

As one acts, as one lives, so he becomes. One who does good becomes good; one who does evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, evil by evil. Therefore they say, 'A man here is made of desire.' As his desire is, so will his intentions be; as his intentions are, so will he act; as he acts, so will he become.<sup>21</sup>

For this reason, *karman* may cause negative as well as positive 'spirals' – a notion found, for instance, in the Bhagavadgītā, which speaks of a reborn *yogin* being 'helplessly carried away' by the force of impressions from his previous lives until he 'treads the highest path', but also of God hurling evil men ever further down into rebirths in 'demonic wombs' (usually interpreted as lower species) until they 'tread the vilest path'.<sup>22</sup> These and similar passages have in fact led certain schools of Hindu thought to

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length of life, and experiences' (*sati mūle tadvipāko jātyāyurbhogāḥ*). Variations on this definition naturally exist, but most tend to include *āyus* or life span. Medical works such as the Carakasamhitā (3.3.28–38), however, argue that longevity depends on a combination of past and present action, and present a number of common-sense objections to the notion of an absolutely fixed span of life. Rather, they advocate the idea of a maximum duration which may be cut short by overexertion, overeating or not eating enough, excessive copulation, illness wrongly treated, etc. Similar distinctions between maximum longevity (*paramāyus*) and 'untimely' or 'accidental' death (*akālamṛtyu*, *apamṛtyu*) are found in astrological works.

<sup>21</sup> Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad 4.4.5: *yathākārī yathācārī tathā bhavati / sādhuḥkārī sādhu bhavati / pāpakārī pāpo bhavati / puṇyaḥ puṇyeṇa karmanā pāpaḥ pāpena / atho khalv āhuḥ kāmamaya evāyaṃ puruṣa iti / sa yathākāmo bhavati tatkratur bhavati / yatkratur bhavati tat karma kurute / yat karma kurute tad abhisampadyate //*

<sup>22</sup> Bhagavadgītā 6.43–45, 16.19–20:

*tatra taṃ buddhisamyogaṃ labhate paurvadehikam /  
yatate ca tato bhūyaḥ saṃsiddhau kurunandana //  
pūrvābhyāsenā tenaiva hriyate hy avāśo 'pi saḥ /  
jijñāsur api yogasya śabdabrahmātivartate //  
prayatnād yatamānas tu yogī saṃśuddhakilbiṣaḥ /  
anekajanmasaṃsiddhas tato yāti parām gatim //*

*tān ahaṃ dviṣataḥ krūrān saṃsāreṣu narādhamān /  
kṣipāmy ajasram aśubhān āsurīṣv eva yoniṣu //  
āsurīm yonim āpannā mūḍhā janmani janmani /  
mām aprāpyaiva kaunteya tato yānti adhamām gatim //*



accept a doctrine of eternal transmigration, without possibility of liberation, for some souls.

*Karman*, then, is considered to influence both man's external fortunes and his internal qualities, or what we might loosely call his 'soul' (although, in the Hindu and Jaina view, our innermost being lies beyond the mutable character). This interest in the inner as well as the outer man is shared by both Greek and Indian astrology, which treat of a subject's mental proclivities as matter-of-factly as they deal with his prospects in matters of health, prosperity, worldly power or love. But in the encounter with the Abrahamic faiths, and most particularly Christianity, the 'qualities of the soul' were to prove a stumbling-block.

Many authorities of the early Church, of course, rejected astrology in its entirety as incompatible with exclusive reliance on and reverence for God – a position reaffirmed by the Catholic catechism of recent years.<sup>23</sup> Justin of Caesarea (c. 100 – c. 165) and Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 220) both considered the art of astrology to have been discovered by fallen angels, and therefore to be condemned by God; and Augustine (354 – 430), himself a former student of astrology, similarly claimed that the predictions of astrologers come true because they are dictated by evil spirits.<sup>24</sup> Successive Church councils from the fourth century onwards anathematized practice of and belief in astrology; and the first Christian emperor (Constantine I, c. 272 – 337) threatened astrologers with death, while his son and successor (Constantine II, 316 – 340) vowed to have them ripped apart with iron claws.<sup>25</sup>

The late Middle Ages, however, saw a wider tolerance of astrology in Christian Europe, into which it had been re-imported along with other aspects of Greek science preserved and developed in the Islamic world. Although never universally accepted by religious authority in either culture, astrology played an important part in medieval physics and medicine. From the realm of theology, however, the stars were absolutely banned; and it was to this realm that the human soul belonged. 'The soul', preached Bernardino of Siena (1380 – 1444), 'is above the realm of the Moon, of Mercury, of Venus, of the Sun, of Mars, of Jupiter, of Saturn and of all the signs which are in them: it is above the 72 constellations.'<sup>26</sup> And a century and a half before, another Franciscan preacher, Berthold of Regensburg, had written:

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<sup>23</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Chapman), articles 2115–2116.

<sup>24</sup> Campion, *Dawn*, p. 267 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Bobrick, Benson, *The Fated Sky: Astrology in History* (New York: Simon & Schuster), p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Garin, Eugenio: *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), p. 32. The somewhat opaque phrase 'of all the signs which are in them' may be a mistranslation for 'of all the [zodiacal] signs in which they are', but I have not seen the original text.

[The stars] have power over trees and over vines, over leaves and grasses, over vegetables and herbs, over corn and all such things; over the birds in the air, over the animals in the forests, and over the fishes in the waters and over the worms in the earth; over all such things that are under heaven, over them our Lord gave power to the stars, except over one thing. [...] It is man's free will: over that no man has any authority except thyself.<sup>27</sup>

The stars could be admitted to 'rule' the natural, sublunar world; but man's soul must be free to accept or reject divine grace and salvation, and must therefore be immune to astrology. This stance became a common if somewhat uneasy compromise between ecclesiastical and astrological teachings throughout the Renaissance. As we shall see, it is the exact opposite of the view held by the astrological reformers of modern times.

With the introduction of new scientific paradigms, interest in astrology declined drastically on the European Continent during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the art was enjoying an unprecedented popularity in England; but a few decades into the next century, fashions had changed even here, and only the occasional enthusiast was left. It was not until the late 1880s that the first stirrings of a movement to popularize astrology were felt, a movement which was largely the creation of one man: William Frederick Allen, soon to be better known as Alan Leo (1860 – 1917). Leo's efforts proved successful in the way so common to popularizing ventures: by altering the thing popularized to the point where one has to ask whether it is, in any meaningful sense, the same thing at all, or rather a new product marketed under an old label.

Astrology was only one of Leo's two great enthusiasms, the other being Theosophy as taught by Helena Blavatsky and, later, Annie Besant – teachings which in themselves were intended as a popularization of the esoteric or 'occult' truths supposedly contained in all ancient religious traditions, although couched mainly in eastern terminology. Leo's life project was to unite the two by reinterpreting astrology as a spiritual doctrine, or, in the words of Wilhelm Knappich, to strip it of its scholastic-Aristotelic dress and shroud it in 'the shimmering magic cloak of Indian Theosophy' instead.<sup>28</sup> (The amount of Indian ideas actually contained in the Theosophical *mélange* is a point which we shall examine shortly.) 'There are two aspects of this Science', Leo wrote: 'the *exoteric* and the *esoteric*.'

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Tester, Jim: *A History of Western Astrology* [hereafter: Tester, *History*] (Woodbridge: Boydell), p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Knappich, Wilhelm: 'Placido de Titi's Leben und Lehre' in *Zenit*, 7–11: 'Denn die empirisch-praktischen Engländer, die schon längst der neuen Himmelsmechanik zugetan waren, zogen ihr einfach das scholastisch-aristotelische Kleid aus [...] In dieser vereinfachten, aber etwas „nackten“ Form wurde sie dann später von Alan Leo, H. S. Green, Sepharial u. a. in den schillernden Zaubermantel der indischen Theosophie eingehüllt [...]'

That side of Astrology which we call exoteric may be styled fatalism, fortune-telling, charlatanry – what you will: but the esoteric Astrology is that which reveals the soul of the Science, its divine aspect [...] those whose minds are intuitive enough to catch the hidden significance of the esoteric side of Astrology know that it is part of THE MYSTERIES.<sup>29</sup>

No highly developed powers of intuition are required to discern which of these two ‘aspects’ Leo valued more; and he did in fact admit quite openly that ‘the esoteric side [...] is the only part of the science that really interests me’.<sup>30</sup> There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of this statement; but neither can it be doubted that Leo’s distaste for ‘fortune-telling’ was sharpened by the court cases brought against him – first in 1914 and again in 1917, only months before his death – on the very charge of telling fortunes. Following the first case, which was dismissed on technical grounds, Leo wrote:

Let us part company with the fatalistic astrologer who prides himself on his predictions and who is ever seeking to convince the world that in the predictive side of Astrology alone shall we find its value. We need not argue the point as to its reality, but instead make a much-needed change in the meaning of the word and call Astrology the science of *tendencies* [...]<sup>31</sup>

The antipathy was mutual, and contemporary ‘fatalistic’ advocates of a mathematically rigorous, no-nonsense predictive astrology such as A. J. Pearce (1840 – 1923) had in fact already parted company with Leo and his fellow Theosophists, denouncing their metaphysical ideas as ‘superstitious nonsense’ and ‘nauseating’.<sup>32</sup>

The same year, Leo and his wife formally merged astrology with Theosophy by founding the Astrological Lodge of the Theosophical Society. The previous year had seen the publication of Leo’s most overtly Theosophical, and perhaps least popular, book: *Esoteric Astrology*, later described even by Charles E. O. Carter, president of the Astrological Lodge, as ‘a big volume containing virtually nothing worth reading’.<sup>33</sup> It is useful, however, in giving us a clear idea of Leo’s beliefs concerning the workings of karma and rebirth, ‘the two pillars upon which all of Theosophical teaching rests’.<sup>34</sup> Here is Leo again:

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<sup>29</sup> Leo, Alan, *Astrology for All* (New York: Cosimo Classics), p. 293.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Curry, Patrick, *A Confusion of Prophets* [hereafter: Curry, *Prophets*] (London: Collins & Brown) p. 144.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Curry, *Prophets*, p. 149.

<sup>32</sup> Pearce, Alfred John, ‘Two Remarkable Horoscopes’ in *Star Lore*, August 1897.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Curry, *Prophets*, p. 145.

<sup>34</sup> Neufeldt, Ronald, ‘In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement’ in Ronald Neufeldt (ed.), *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments* [hereafter: Neufeldt, ‘Utopia’]

For one lifetime the soul will see everything from the point of view of Jupiter, and after death its experience will go to enrich the Individuality, making stronger within it the influence of Jupiter. Another Personality will follow it after an interval of rest in the heaven world, born under a different planet, intended to enrich another aspect of the Individuality; and when, after a succession of lives the time comes for the soul to be born again under Jupiter [...] the remainder of the map [i.e., horoscope] of this Jupiter personality will be unlike that of the former one, because the soul will have grown, evolved, changed somewhat in the long interval, will have worked off some of its old karma, and will have made fresh, and the Divine Guardians of man will see that it is born in a different environment for the sake of obtaining increased experience. [...]

There is no other difference between souls than that which is due to the varied kind of experiences they have had in the past. The greatest sinner and the highest saint do not differ except in this, and in the fact that the saint is an old and experienced soul, whereas the sinner is relatively young and inexperienced as a soul. Birth in successive Personalities under new combinations of signs and planets, provides, astrologically speaking, the experiences required; and this will ensure that the sinner of to-day will be the great saint of the distant future.<sup>35</sup>

Analysing this passage, we find four interlinked themes. First of all, there is a *purpose* to our transmigratory existence; it is not mere blind mechanism or neutral fact. Second, this purpose is the gathering of *experience*, here described astrologically in terms of 'being born under' various planets and thereby experiencing the world from different points of view. Third, the accumulation of such variegated experience will bring about the *evolution* of the soul. Predicting the time and nature of the individual experiences is therefore of secondary interest at best, and at any rate cannot go beyond the identification of 'tendencies'; the important thing is how the experiences affect the soul. Fourth, this evolutive perspective presupposes *a beginning and an end* to the process of transmigration, with souls of varying age situated at different points in the spiritual curriculum.

This is all orthodox Theosophy, if such an expression is not an oxymoron. Ronald Neufeldt has rightly characterized Blavatsky's teachings on karma and rebirth as 'utopian', in the sense that progress or evolution constitutes their most important element: 'Indeed, rebirth becomes the means whereby progress is achieved under the sway of the law of karma.'<sup>36</sup> Such utopian belief in the inevitability of progress, in a chain of evolution where 'each fresh attempt is more successful than the previous

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(New York: SUNY Press), p. 233.

<sup>35</sup> Leo, Alan, *Esoteric Astrology* [hereafter: Leo, *Esoteric Astrology*] (Rochester: Inner Traditions), p. 104 f.

<sup>36</sup> Neufeldt, 'Utopia', p. 247.

one',<sup>37</sup> is highly characteristic of late 19<sup>th</sup> century western thought, and reflects the profound impact on it of the ongoing industrial revolution. Blavatsky's metaphysical views are, in this respect, not dissimilar to the biological evolutionism of Darwin or the socio-political evolutionism of Spencer. They contrast sharply, however, with the ideas of *karman* and transmigration present in the Indic religions.

I have already said that in Indian thought, *saṃsāra* or the cycle of transmigration is a closed, beginningless system fuelled by *karman*. In Buddhism and Jainism this transmigratory existence is seen as a fundamental fact in itself, in no need of any further, underlying cause. In Hinduism, the world is typically considered as created by or emanating from God or the Absolute (*brahman*); but brahmanical theologians are also clear that the world is eternal, and its 'emanation' an ontological rather than a temporal relationship. The notion that creation serves some purpose is explicitly rejected; it is divine 'play alone'.<sup>38</sup>

There is no automatic progress built into the system of transmigration, nor is it a one-way road: the individual self or soul has been wandering through *saṃsāra* forever and, if left to the mechanism of *karman*, will continue to do so forevermore, raising or lowering itself by its own actions rather than evolving according to some grand design. There is no beginning, no end, no purpose, no progress; and 'experience', so far from leading to spiritual fulfilment, is the stuff from which the soul builds the walls that imprison it.<sup>39</sup> In view of these very different perspectives, it may well be asked how

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Neufeldt, 'Utopia', p. 248.

<sup>38</sup> See Brahmasūtra 2.1.32–33 (*na prayojanavattvāt, lokavat tu līlākaivalyam*). Śaṅkara comments: 'Just as, in the world, the activities of a king or of a royal minister whose [every] desire is fulfilled take the form of mere play in places of amusement, without any other purpose in view [...] so too the activity of Lord, disregarding any other purpose, by his very nature will take the form of mere play; for no other purpose of the Lord can be discerned either by reason or from Revelation (*śruti*) [...]' (*yathā loke kasyacid āptaśaṅsya rājño rājāmātyasya vā vyatiriktaṃ kiñcit prayojanam anabhisandhāya kevalaṃ līlārūpāḥ pravṛttayaḥ krīḍāvihāreṣu bhavanti [...] evam īśvarasyāpy anapekṣya prayojanāntaraṃ svabhāvād eva kevalaṃ līlārūpā pravṛttir bhaviṣyati na hīśvarasya prayojanāntaraṃ nirūpyamāṇaṃ nyāyataḥ śrutito vā saṃbhavati [...]*).

<sup>39</sup> Although liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of transmigration is considered possible only from certain positions within the world of *karman* and after lifetimes of striving (cf. the discussion of 'spiralling' *karman* above), such liberation is not achieved by action but, on the contrary, by the extinction of the effects of action (cf. note 16). Even the most 'spiritual' mode of experience within this world (*sattva-guṇa*) is considered potentially enslaving; cf. Bhagavadgītā 14.5–6:

*sattvaṃ rajas tama iti guṇāḥ prakṛtisambhavāḥ /  
nibadhnanti mahābāho dehe dehinam avyayam //  
tatra sattvaṃ nirmalatvāt prakāśakam anāmayam /  
sukhasaṅgena badhnāti jñānasāṅgena cānagha //*

'Purity (*sattva*), passion (*rajas*) and darkness (*tamas*) are the qualities born of [material] nature. They bind the imperishable embodied [self] to the body, O mighty-armed one. Among them,

much the Theosophical teachings on karma incorporated into Leo's 'modernized' astrology really owe to India.

As discussed earlier, the metaphysical conception of action so closely connected with astrology in India strikes a compromise between the ideas of absolute fate and absolute freedom. Leo and his followers similarly saw karma as an alternative to the 'fatalism' which they, rightly or wrongly, imputed to their more conservative – and, it must be said, often more technically astute – astrological colleagues. But while Indian astrology remained, and still remains today, a primarily predictive discipline, Leo, as we have seen, was highly disparaging of 'the predictive side of Astrology'.

Intriguingly, however, only statements about external events counted as 'prediction' with the Theosophical astrologers: delineating a person's character or mental qualities was seen as perfectly legitimate, indeed often as the *only* legitimate use of astrology, although it is difficult to see how this is different from prediction – particularly assuming that, in Leo's favourite catch-phrase, 'Character is Destiny'. The solution to the conundrum no doubt lies in the relation of astrology to the predominant ideology of the age. In pre-modern Europe this meant Christianity as defined by the Church; and the principal domain of the Church was the human soul – a monopoly not to be infringed on. The soul therefore had to be safeguarded from planetary influences. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, by contrast, Science had largely replaced the Church as arbiter of truth; and the domain of Science, just as jealously guarded, was matter and mechanistic causality. The soul, if indeed it existed, was of little interest to Science, and astrologers were therefore free to expound upon it, as long as they did not stake any claim in the world of concrete and measurable results.

It was Dane Rudhyar (1895 – 1985), another highly influential Theosophist astrologer, who, two decades after Leo's demise, brought this 'tendency' to its logical conclusion by claiming that accurate prediction is not only impossible in practice, but actually undesirable:

Besides, why should events be foretold accurately? The coefficient of inaccuracy is the coefficient of freedom. [...] And to be free means always somewhat *not to know*; it is the coefficient of inaccuracy. It is based on the courage to go forth while not knowing the future.

That is why spiritual teachers or "Masters" – whatever they be – *never* compel, *never* show the exact future of any action undertaken. For to do so would be to rob a man of his creative freedom and his creative initiative. What man can do is so to understand the past, so to grasp the full significance of the seed-form of his being and destiny (birth-chart), that he is fully prepared to meet any future – to meet it significantly, with courage, with understanding and from such a

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purity by its flawlessness is illuminating and free from suffering: it binds by the bonds of happiness and by the bonds of knowledge, O sinless one.'

“formed” view-point that all events are seen as beautiful. This is the creative and the radiant life of fulfillment.<sup>40</sup>

In short, where ignorance is creative fulfilment, 'tis folly to be wise. Astrology has done a volte-face: it no longer looks forwards in an attempt to predict and, if possible, control the future, but rather backwards, trying to find symbolic meaning in what has led up to the present. Naturally, karma – unless it is to be discarded altogether – has to be similarly re-defined as pertaining only to the past; and Rudhyar does precisely that: ‘The inertia of the past (karma)’, he says, ‘makes the mind unable to clearly see the new possibilities for action and thought (dharma) which the birth-situation actually contains.’<sup>41</sup> Incidentally, we have here another casualty of astrological newspeak. *Dharma* is a versatile Sanskrit term meaning, in different contexts, law, duty, virtue (both in the sense of inherent nature and in the sense of morality) or religion; but it does *not* mean ‘new possibilities for action and thought’. *Dharma* imposes restrictions on our choice of action rather than widening it.<sup>42</sup> Rudhyar, however, was in need of an antithesis to his concept of karma, and perhaps could not resist one that rhymes.

From this perspective of creative and courageous inaccuracy, karmic bondage lies in the past, while the future holds unlimited evolutionary potential. The present, to Rudhyar, is far more than a fleeting moment: it is the dividing line between good and evil.

Evil is essentially the refusal to move toward the future. It is to accept the repetitive inertia of past choices as inevitable or too powerful to oppose. It is to succumb to karma, instead of using what the past has produced as a floor against which to rebound, and of investing this rebounding with a creative, future-engendering meaning.<sup>43</sup>

We may not be entirely sure what a ‘future-engendering meaning’ is, but it is clear that the future has become, in C. S. Lewis’s phrase, ‘a promised land which favoured heroes attain – not [...] something which everyone reaches at the rate of sixty minutes an hour,

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<sup>40</sup> Rudhyar, Dane, *The Astrology of Personality: A Reformulation of Astrological Concepts and Ideals in Terms of Contemporary Psychology and Philosophy* (New York: Lucis Publishing), p. 460 f.

<sup>41</sup> Rudhyar, Dane, ‘Transmutation of Karma into Dharma’ in Virginia Hanson, Rosemarie Stewart and Shirley Nicholson (ed.), *Karma: Rhythmic Return to Harmony* [hereafter: Rudhyar, ‘Transmutation’] (Wheaton: Quest Books), p. 232.

<sup>42</sup> The word is still used in something like its classical sense in Leo, *Esoteric Astrology*, p. 26: ‘Saturn is the planet of “Dharma,” duty or obligation, for every human creature.’ In traditional Indian astrology, however, *dharma* is seldom mentioned except as a name for the 9<sup>th</sup> house (*bhāva*, *sthāna*) of the horoscope, and is not specifically related to Saturn.

<sup>43</sup> Rudhyar, ‘Transmutation’, p. 241 f.

whatever he does, whoever he is'.<sup>44</sup> The role of astrology in relation to this view of time and karma is somewhat vague; but to 'grasp the full significance of the seed-form of one's being and destiny' in the form of the natal horoscope obviously does not entail any foreknowledge of what actual events that seed will ripen into. The writing on the forehead remains obscure.

In conclusion, we see that the classical Indic concept of *karman* and the modern Theosophical notion of 'karma' have served to embed astrology within two rather dissimilar metaphysical structures. In India, an astrological praxis of Hellenistic origin, at once descriptive and prescriptive and spanning both internal and external aspects of human life, was successfully merged with a theory of action as the ultimate force shaping physical events and mental qualities in a beginningless cycle of rebirth with no other purpose or design. In the western world at the turn of the last century, where no such unifying theory existed, a hybrid version of karma centred around the idea of constant progress or evolution so characteristic of the period was used to reinforce the dichotomy between the subjective and objective spheres, and to steer students of astrology firmly away from the lower or exoteric astrology of 'fatalistic prediction' and 'fortune-telling' so hateful to the modern mind, directing them instead towards the higher, esoteric realm of spiritual symbolism.

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<sup>44</sup> Lewis, Clive Staples, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fontana Books), p. 130.



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